

# Using Daily Transition Strategies to Support All Children

Peggy Thelen and Tammy Klifman

**T**ransitions in early childhood classrooms are changes from one activity to another or from one place to another. Well-planned transitions can be positive learning experiences for children. During transitions children can sing songs, follow a leader by copying his or her physical motions, practice counting, or even recite a favorite poem or nursery rhyme.

For some children, transitions can be challenging. Their biological wiring, experiences, and preferences may make it difficult for them to deal with change (Kagan & Fox 2006). These children need extra time and help with even simple changes.

Other children have transition difficulties due to particular special needs. These children often face a variety of challenges, including difficulty communicating information, needs, and

desires (Allen & Cowdery 2009). No matter the child or the cause, early childhood educators are responsible for helping children learn to transition with minimal stress.

To help children transition, alternative communication systems, such as those that use signs, symbols, or gestures, can reduce the frequency of negative behaviors like tantrums, biting, and hitting (Trief 2007). These systems also can increase the time children spend engaged with materials and doing activities (Spriggs, Gast, & Ayres 2007) and improve social interactions with peers and adults (Stromer et al. 2006).

This article offers several transition strategies that support positive behavior and learning for all children, including children with a variety of special needs. The scope and length of use of each strategy will vary from child to child and can be adjusted or eliminated as needed. While the focus here is on early childhood classroom use, many of these strategies could be adapted for use in other settings, such as family child care homes.

children learn to manage their time and build self-regulation skills. Putting a visual schedule on a bulletin board and verbally announcing the day's events helps all children learn the day's schedule of activities. To help children focus on the next activity, a visual daily schedule, containing pictures or words of different colors, may feature activities of the day, a sequence of events and/or tasks to be completed, and changes in routine.

**Schedules make communication less stressful for children and teachers and help children learn to manage their time and build self-regulation skills.**

Teachers also can include options in the visual schedule so that children can choose what to do. For example, the schedule may offer several center options for choice time. Children can choose to go to the dramatic play center, the block center, the creation station, or another center. When ready to move on, they can go back to the schedule to look at the other learning center options.

Peggy Thelen, PhD, is an associate professor of education and the early childhood education director at Alma College in Alma, Michigan. A former preschool teacher, Peggy works closely with local early childhood education and advocacy programs. [thelen@alma.edu](mailto:thelen@alma.edu)

Tammy Klifman, MA, is an early childhood special education teacher for the Gratiot-Isabella Regional Education Service District in Alma, Michigan. She has worked with preschoolers with special needs for 20 years. [TKlifman@giresd.net](mailto:TKlifman@giresd.net)

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## Activity schedules

Schedules provide the framework for transitions. They signal when an activity starts, when it ends, and when another activity begins. Schedules make communication less stressful for children and teachers and help

As discussed later, this visual schedule of options especially supports children with limited language skills and those who have difficulty settling on an initial activity. Providing opportunities for children to make choices and be autonomous supports learning and minimizes problem behaviors (Banda, Grimmer, & Hart 2009).

## Visual prompts

The use of visual prompts, like those found in visual schedules, can help children learn to move from one activity to another (Banda, Grimmer, & Hart 2009). The structure and clear expectations of the prompts support children's ability to learn to transition independently and rely less on adult prompting. A child's motivation and acceptance of an alternative form of communication is the most crucial part of its success (King 1999). To increase the likelihood a child will follow a visual schedule, prompts should be familiar and easily recognizable (Downing & Peckham-Hardin 2001).

Teachers can offer visual prompts, or cues, in many forms (Banda, Grimmer, & Hart 2009), including drawings, photographs, symbols, words, or computer images. While visual prompts are just one alternative method of communication, they are a highly effective strategy for letting children know that a change in activity, materials, or location is coming. The prompt may also illustrate a change in behavior expectation. For example, an initial prompt may show a picture of a book, followed by one that shows an ear indicating that it is time to listen.

## Individual visual schedules

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is an example of a successful visual communication strategy. PECS was originally designed to help children with autism and other developmental disabilities communicate effectively. The system includes six phases and starts with teaching a child to give a picture of a desired item or activity to a communicative partner, who honors the exchange as a request. PECS can be adapted to help children who face various communication challenges in different settings. (For more information, go to [www.pecsusa.com/pecs.php](http://www.pecsusa.com/pecs.php).)

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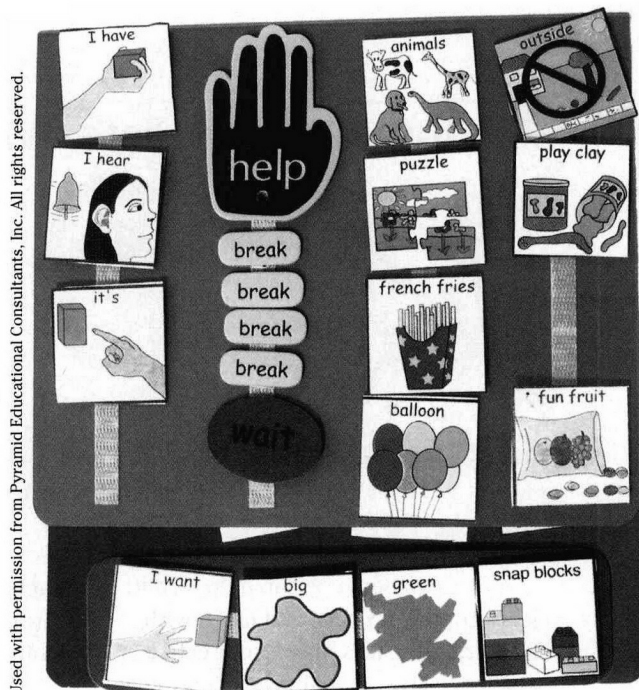
magazine pictures and/or words that represent the schedule and available activity choices. Next, add small Velcro squares to the images and to the inside of a vinyl two-pocket folder.

Place the squares inside the folder in a horizontal line, above the right and left inside pockets. Then place the laminated images (or words) in the left inside pocket of the folder and label the right inside pocket Done.

At the start of the day, children can select the images from the right pocket that represent the schedule and place them in the appropriate order on the Velcro line. As the day progresses and children finish activities, they remove them from the Velcro line and add them to the Done pocket. This type of folder is an easy way to display a short sequence of events. Children can feel successful as they complete

activities and tear off each image.

**Sequence strips.** Another strategy for providing visual prompts or cues for individual children involves placing sequence strips for an activity in a designated area, such as on a cubby or in a locker (Kimball et al. 2003; Banda, Grimmer, & Hart 2009). For example, a strip mounted inside a child's locker could show the steps for taking care of personal belongings such as a coat and backpack. Sequence strips can also be used



Early childhood educators can adapt the principles of PECS to create visual schedules for children who have difficulties with transitions. For example, teachers might make transition communication books with images that children can manipulate to express the sequence of events throughout the day.

**Transition communication books.** To create books for individual children, teachers can use photographs or cut out and laminate digital or

## Behavioral visual support

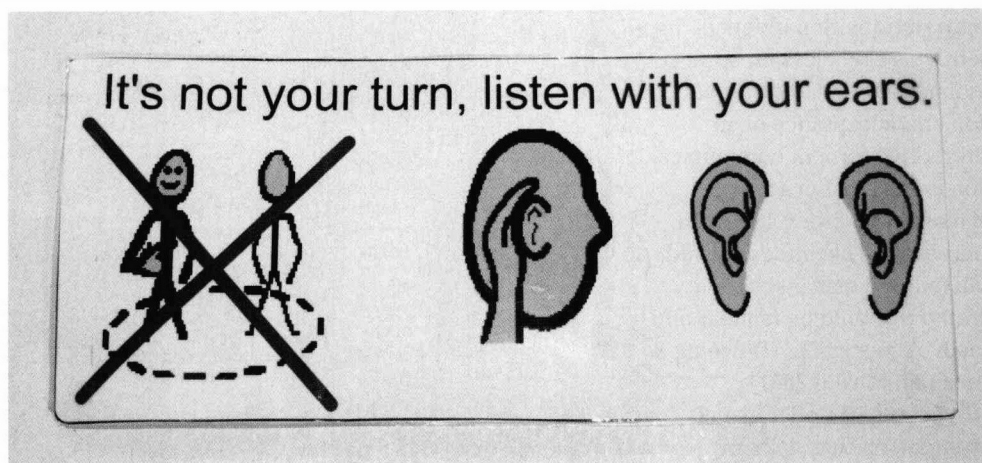
with the whole class. For example, a visual sequence strip mounted above the sink can demonstrate the steps of hand washing.

Sequence strips may be made up of a series of pictures, photographs, words, symbols, or any combination of such. They can also “serve as cues that can help reduce students’ challenges in predicting, preparing for, and transitioning between school activities” (Kimball et al. 2003, 40–41). Organize and store the photos, pictures, symbols, and other visuals in a child’s personal notebook, and when needed, mount the appropriate prompts with Velcro at the desired location.

**Activity schedules.** Use activity schedules to assist children in developing the ability to independently complete sequences of multiple activities. Once children have mastered the independent use of schedules, use activity schedules to help them learn new activities (see Stromer et al. 2006). Choose a strategy that fits a child’s age, abilities, learning needs, and personal preferences.

On a personal-size whiteboard (dry-erase) or chalkboard, the teacher or classroom aide can use symbols, pictures, or words to present the child’s daily schedule or task sequence. When the child finishes one activity or one step of a task, he or she simply erases that part and moves on to the next activity or step. Or the adult can write the child’s schedule or task steps on a sheet of paper and tape it to his or her desk. When the step or task is done, the child crosses it off. This also works well for older children who can write their own daily schedules.

Teachers can also use visuals to guide children’s behavior. Visual supports that remind children of appropriate behavior include individual pictures/symbols or a sequence of pictures/symbols that explain what behavior is expected at a concrete level. For example, the universal No sign indicates areas that are off-limits for children. This sign is especially useful at the beginning of the school year, when children are figuring out what is accessible to them and what is not. Placing a No sign on such things as supply cabinets and the teacher’s desk helps deter curious investigators.



A picture sequence can help a child learn to wait his turn and listen with his ears. Teachers may also create a sequence strip that shows a child how to transition out of the classroom with a teacher or a buddy, such as indicating that it is not OK to run away alone; it is time to walk and hold hands with a partner.

## Concrete objects

For children with visual impairments or sensory issues, teachers can create tactile or tangible schedules. Touchable prompts allow more independence in following the daily schedule (Trief 2007; Trief, Bruce, & Cascella 2010). For example, teachers

can place objects in a set of boxes that are ordered according to the daily schedule. If a child does not remember what happens after lunch, he or she can simply refer back to the tactile schedule and prepare for the afternoon’s activities without having to ask for assistance.

The physical cues could be actual or miniature versions of objects or symbols of the next event or activity. Examples of tactile cues include a wooden circle for large group (Trief 2007), a pencil for journal writing, and a plastic plus sign for mathematics. Mark, a visually impaired first-grader, says his favorite schedule clue is the paintbrush, which denotes art class.

Teachers can get creative and brainstorm with children which objects best signify the activities for their setting.

## Simple signals

Many teachers successfully use a visual or auditory signal, or a combination of both, to alert children that a transition is coming. Consistent use of such signals helps children develop an understanding of time and lets them

finish one activity and prepare for the next with ease.

Teachers can use some of these easy-to-incorporate visual signals:

- Hold up fingers ("You have five more minutes to work on your story").
- Show a picture or symbol of the next activity.
- Hold or hang up a yellow yield sign, signaling that the activity will end shortly.
- Write the time left on the white board or chalkboard.
- Tap children on the shoulder.
- Post a five-minute warning sign or designate a child to walk around the classroom with the sign.
- Provide a stop card or sign for children who get easily overstimulated. When children are overstimulated, they often have trouble responding to a verbal cue, or the situation is such

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that a verbal cue is not appropriate. In these instances, using a nonverbal signal such as the American Sign Language sign for *stop*, or other visual cues, such as putting a hand up or using a picture of a stop sign, may draw a child's attention to her actions and redirect the behavior.

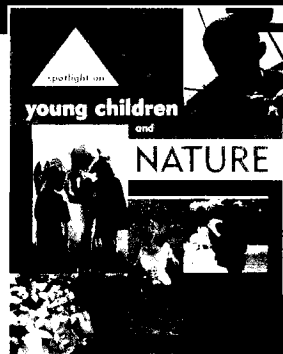
#### Timers

One practical transitioning tool is a three-dot timer, a card stock rectangle with three Velcro circles cut out and

placed evenly on the strip. Depending on a child's age, ability, or activity, as a certain amount of time passes, either the teacher or the child rips off the dots. The child learns that as the dots come off, there is less and less time to finish the activity; and when the last dot is removed, it is time to finish the activity.

Another time tool is the visual timer. As the dial is turned to the designated time for the task, the timed region turns red. Children soon learn that as the red region shrinks, time is passing.

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## Child-initiated experiences allow children to choose the materials, peers, or activities they are interested in.

### Simple auditory signals

Teachers can use some of these easy-to-incorporate auditory signals:

- Ring a bell or shake a set of hand bells (or any other appropriate instrument).
- Tip a rain shaker.
- Shake a tambourine.
- Play a special song.
- Give a verbal warning ("We will be cleaning up and lining up for music in five minutes").
- Ask the Helper of the Day to verbally cue classmates that they will be moving to the next activity in five minutes.

Depending on children's needs, it may be advisable to give two warning signals before a transition. The first is a general signal telling all children that they have a certain amount of time (10 minutes, for example) to finish the activity. The second signal (given at about the five-minute mark) is to support children who have difficulty ending one activity and starting another.

The old-fashioned egg timer is a simple and convenient audio signal. It still works wonders with children. They can hear the ticking of the timer and the *ding!* when time is up. Egg timers work well for individual children as well as for groups completing

a task. They are reasonably priced, portable, and easy to store.

### Choice

Giving children choices is an important step in helping them become more independent. Child-initiated experiences allow children to choose the materials, peers, or activities they are interested in. Children build skills and learn by exploring and trying out new experiences or repeating the experiences they enjoy. Yet a child can sometimes get too focused on one activity or set of materials and not be able to transition away from it or explore the rest of the classroom. To help children recognize the choices they have, and to support a richer classroom experience, teachers may need to help them see the variety of opportunities offered.

### Color tickets

Color tickets can be helpful if children have a difficult time choosing an activity or materials to explore, or have trouble transitioning from one area or activity to another. Activity tables (like the puzzle table or playdough table) can be referred to by color

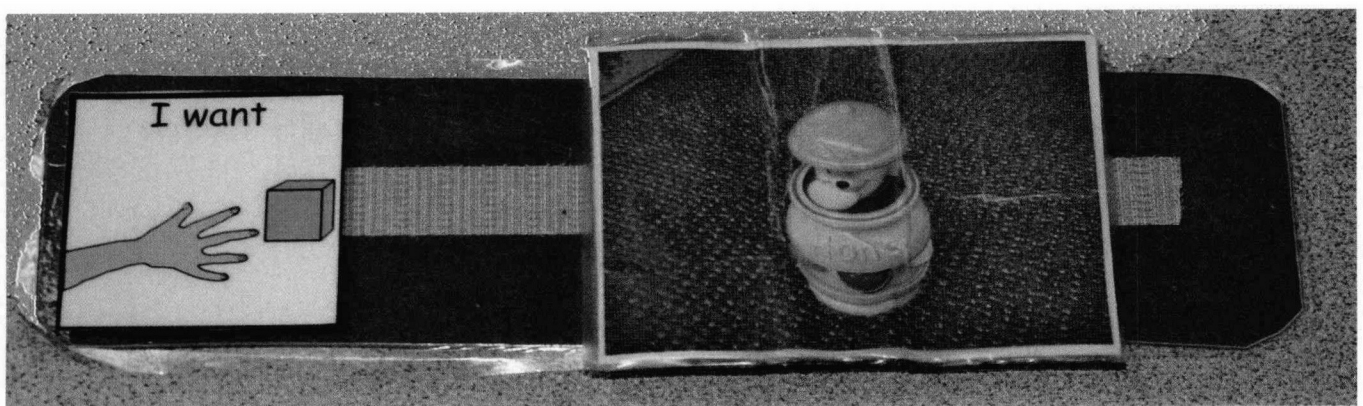
instead of use. For example, the puzzle table may have a blue square on it and be called the "blue table." Color names give the teacher more flexible use of tables, which is especially practical in smaller classrooms or spaces. The name of the table stays the same; it is only the use of the table that changes. After attaching a different colored square to each activity table, add a Velcro strip on which the children can stick their tickets.

To make individual tickets, cut out and laminate matching color squares with Velcro on the back. Place the tickets on the activity schedule for children to see, or keep them in a basket or on a ring to offer to a child who seems to be having trouble choosing an activity or center. Choosing a color ticket gives the child direction and gives him something to carry to the table.

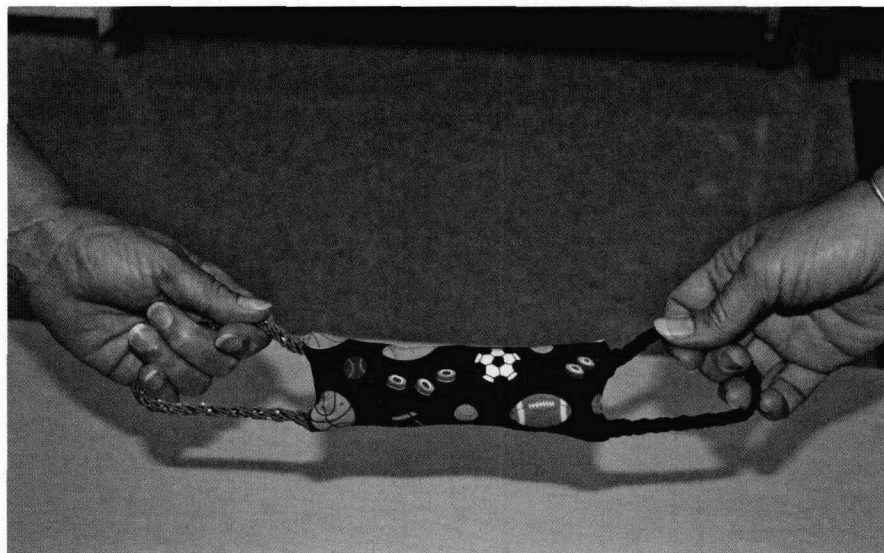
If a child cannot do this independently, an adult may also use the tickets to help support the child. The adult can get two matching tickets, approach the child, and say, "Here is my blue ticket and here is yours. Let's go find the blue table together."

### Choice strips

Choice strips can encourage individual children who have a hard time transitioning to an activity—as well as children with limited language and children with autism—to describe, plan, carry out, and finish an activity. The strips are laminated card stock with a Velcro strip across the center. The first square on the strip shows



the words *I want* with a picture of a hand reaching for an object. From a notebook of activity pictures assembled by the teacher, the child chooses a picture of an activity or a material. The child then attaches the picture to the Velcro next to the *I want* square and announces his choice. When he is done with the materials or finishes the activity, he returns the activity picture to the notebook and attaches an image of empty hands and the words *All Done!* to the end of the strip. As the school year progresses, the child moves from words paired with pictures or symbols to words alone and on to verbal planning.



### Waiting hands

Waiting (or shadow) hands are a fun and easy way to help children control their impulse to grab materials while waiting for directions or to help them keep their hands in their own space. To implement this strategy,

- Trace a child's hands on colored card stock to make a "shadow," then cut out and glue the shadow onto a larger, contrasting piece of card stock. Make a set of shadow hands for each child.

- Introduce the hands in a small or large group. Invite the children to place their hands on the shadow hands. Explain that they will put their hands on the shadows when it is time to listen or to wait their turn during an activity, or when they have the urge to touch materials or disturb their neighbor. The waiting hands will help them keep their own hands quiet and in their own space.

- Explain how and when to use the hands: "The waiting hands remind you that it is time to listen [or wait your turn] and keep your hands in your own space. Rest your hands on the shadow hands to help them be 'quiet,' so they don't disturb other children or materials. Every once in a while, look down to see if your hands are still resting on the shadows. If they are not, be sure to put them back!"

Remove the waiting hands as individual children show they no longer need the visual reminder to keep their hands in their own space. Continue their use as long as necessary for children who still need the visual reminder to keep their hands quiet (that is, children who are still learning not to grab materials or disturb other children when it is time to listen or wait).

### Transitions out of the classroom

Inevitably, individuals or groups of children must move out of the classroom to go to the bathroom, a different classroom or activity, the gym, the lunch room, outside, and so on. During these transition times children can

- walk backwards (this also slows them down!),
- skip, hop, or slide down the hall,

- ride a tricycle (this is especially helpful for children with special needs who need practice with large muscles),
- ride a hobby horse, or
- count how many steps it takes to get to the destination.

For children who must leave the classroom to receive special services, a good preparation strategy is to use a photograph of the person who provides the service. For example, Narie, a kindergartner with autism, has speech therapy twice a week. Narie's individual activity schedule includes a photograph of the speech therapist. Shortly before therapy, the classroom teacher shows Narie the photograph and reminds her that it will soon be speech time. Using photos as transition prompts offers variety and helps children develop flexibility with new materials and directions.

Certain children may have difficulty remembering the names of the supporting adults in the classroom, especially at the beginning of the school year. Some special education settings have five or more adults in the classroom, including the teacher, one or more classroom aides, a speech therapist, an occupational therapist, and a physical therapist. For those children who need the support, photographs may help them physically transition from one person to the next inside the classroom. For example, when it

**Using photos as transition prompts offers variety and helps children develop flexibility with new materials and directions.**

is Claire's turn to work with the physical therapist, the teacher can either give her the therapist's photograph or point to it in an array of photos and direct her to the area of the room where they will be working. Photos are also a great way to introduce adults who will chaperone upcoming trips or who are assisting in the classroom.

### Transition buddies

Buddy techniques, such as pairing a child who needs help transitioning with an encouraging, supportive classmate, are successful in inclusive and general education settings (Jackson & Campbell 2009). Buddies help reduce fear and calm anxiety about transitions; they help children stay focused on the transition or task, and they serve as role models for transitioning and on-task behavior. For example, on his own, Louis has behavior problems when transitioning from the playground to the classroom and from the classroom to the playground. With his new buddy Matt, he is much calmer and transitions without behavior problems.

Selection of a buddy should be a mutual decision between the buddy, the child, and the teacher. Children may keep the same buddy throughout the school year or rotate to new buddies, depending on each situation. Having a buddy is also a way to encourage new friendships.

### Buddy bands

When several or even all of the children are leaving the classroom to go somewhere else, a fun and useful tool is a buddy band. Teachers find these easy-to-use bands useful on field trips, as children walk out to meet the bus, and as a way to learn to walk in pairs. A buddy band can really be anything that two children can hold as a pair but not touch hands. This eliminates hand holding, which may be uncomfortable for some children. Large elastic hair bands work well, but a stuffed animal or a short scarf can also be used. The band shown (see

p. 97) is a little more elaborate than an elastic hair band, but it works well as a buddy band.

### Lining up

Many children get wiggly while waiting for everyone to line up so the class can walk to another classroom or outdoors. To reduce frustration and help children cope with the wait time, attach cutouts of pairs of feet or shoes in a line on the floor for children to stand on. Clear packing tape works well to secure the cutouts, but find out the method that is acceptable at your site before you attach them. Use the same color and size of shoes/footprints and make sure the space between each set is appropriate for the children in your program. Ask the children to line up by standing on a pair of feet. This helps children become more independent as they know what behavior the teacher expects when they wait in line.

## Using transition strategies that work for all children in the classroom saves both time and stress.

Another suggestion is to put shoe cutouts in front of the children's lockers and ask children to place their shoes on them when they change into indoor slippers or boots on rainy days. This helps to keep shoes neatly lined up. It would work well with older children who transition in and out of the building for recess several times a day.

### Conclusion

Transitions are an inevitable part of the school day. Using transition strategies that work for all children in the classroom saves both time and stress. When selecting a new transition strategy, consider children's ages and

abilities. Practice with the children to ensure success. Remember, even simple modifications to classroom routines can be effective.

This article provides many transition strategies but is by no means an exhaustive list. Ask colleagues or other educators what strategies work for them. There are no secrets to successful transitions—only appropriate and intentional strategies!

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